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Why?

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HR 677: FilVets' last stand

Military history is replete with famous last stands. Custer's at Little Big Horn, The Alamo; Gregorio del Pilar's Tirad Pass, and Bataan and Corregidor are only a few of those famous last ditch efforts to win against overwhelming odds.

In the 60-year struggle of the Filipino World War II veterans, many battles were fought, albeit not in the field of armed combat but in the hallowed halls of the U.S. Congress and various U.S. Courts. Small victories were won here and there, such as the naturalization of some veterans as U.S. citizens and the more recent healthcare benefits, which opened USVA-operated hospitals, clinics and retirement homes to the FilVets who live in the U.S.

What has been very elusive was the old age pension to which the FilVets, most of whom live in poverty here in the U.S. and over there in the Philippines, who could no longer work and have no other means of income, should be entitled to, like their U.S. comrades in arms in World War II. This has been a very contentious issue, with several attempts in Congress and the Courts which so far have ended only in more frustrations for the Fil-Vets.

Today, HR677, a bill introduced by Congressman Randy "Duke" Cunningham (R-Escondido) and strongly supported by Congressman Bob Filner (D-Chula Vista), and even by Representative Nancy Pelosi, another California lawmaker who is also the Minority Floor Leader, awaits action by Congress. Supported by a bipartisan group of representatives who are sympathetic to the sad plight of these hapless former freedom fighters, the Bill, when passed into law, would provide for a substantial monthly pension to

see the veterans through in their old age, until they finally fade away.

In the now peaceful battle for recognition of their wartime service in the U.S. Army, the FilVets stand behind HR677 as their final and last ditch effort to convince the U.S. government that their worthy contribution to the defense of America during her darkest days in World War II, earned them the right to stand alongside their American counterparts as full-pledged U.S. veterans, entitled to all benefits provided for in the GI Bill of Rights.

HR677 seeks to amend the restrictive provisions of the infamous Rescission Act of 1946, which effectively nullified all entitlements of the FilVets. In so doing, RA1946 also took away their dignity and honor, leaving the FilVets out in the cold to fend for themselves. HR677, once enacted into law, would restore all that these veterans lost.

But the big question now is, will HR677 pass muster in Congress? Or will the FilVets be forced to settle for lesser benefits under S-68, a Bill in the Senate authored by Democratic Senator Daniel Inouye? Inouye, himself a World War II veteran and winner of the most-coveted Congressional Medal of Honor, crafted the Bill as a fall back position for the FilVets if HR677 fails in the Lower House. S-68 offers much lower benefits, which could be termed "better than nothing," if HR677 never sees the light of day.

Ironically, while a preponderant majority of the FilVets in the U.S. and the Philippines stand solidly behind HR677, there is a small group of their brother veterans who are aggressively promoting the passage of S-68. even before

HR677 is referred to Committee for discussion. These self-styled "crusaders," led by, sad to say, an authentic Filipino World War II veteran and ably assisted by a glib-tongued opportunist who shamelessly refers to himself as the "official lobbyist" of the FilVets in the U.S. Congress, are actually against the enactment into law of HR677.

They are supporting S-68, with the backing of no less than the Philippine Ambassador to Washington, who actually has no business representing the interests of the FilVets. Their rationale for supporting S-68 is simple, and to use their own word, "doable," in the sense that said bill, having a lesser financial outlay, would be easier to pass in the cash-conscious environment now and ever prevailing in the U.S. Congress. And never mind if the same would result in paltry benefits to the FilVets, who are pinning their hopes in the passage of HR677.

"In unity, there is strength." This is a time-honored saying, the meaning of which is totally lost to erstwhile Sgt. Patricio Ganio, the self-appointed head honcho of the American Coalition of Filipino Veterans (ACFV); Eric Lachica, the self-anointed "lobbyist" and so-called Executive Director of the ACFV; and Alberto del Rosario, Philippine Ambassador to the U.S., who is beholden to these two clowns. These caustic eroders and their ilk, whom I have often called *kalawang sa bakal* (rust on iron) in my previous columns, are doing their best to thwart the effort of the preponderant veterans majority to successfully pass HR677. Shame on all of them!

The fight for justice for these beloved veterans will continue and these *kalawang sa bakal* will fail in their selfish efforts to make themselves "knights in shining armor" in the eyes of their fellow misguided admirers. The majority of veterans who support HR677 will prevail, and with the help of God Almighty, finally see the day when America would fulfill her moral obligation to these brave warriors who placed their lives on the line to help make the U.S.A. what it is today – the greatest country in the world!